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SUBJECT: NORTHERN LABOR UNIONS, STUDENTS AND MEDIA DIVIDED OVER PAD

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1B. BANGKOK 2592
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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary and Comment

11. (SBU) Labor unions in northern Thailand are split, with some supporting the anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and others supporting Prime Minister Samak's government, though the more vocal ones support PAD. Over 1,000 PAD supporters have traveled from the north to Bangkok to join the PAD demonstrations so far, many of whom belong to labor unions. Meanwhile, Chiang Mai's Provincial Governor led a peaceful pro-government peaceful rally that attracted approximately 2,000 participants. Reactions in the media and among our contacts have varied, with some outlets less critical of PAD than others.

Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander Anuphong's level-headed performance has garnered positive reviews, though some analysts see PAD as having the upper hand.

12. (C) Comment: So far, we have no indication that supporters of PAD based in the north are doing anything more than traveling to Bangkok to join the ongoing protests. However, if government security forces crack down violently, that could change quickly.

Those workers in the north who are sympathetic to PAD could attempt more significant action, including cutting off utilities and other services in northern provinces. Such steps would entail high risk, given the likelihood of backlash from the northern populace that has consistently been a stronghold for the current governing coalition and its Thai Rak Thai antecedent. End Summary and Comment.

PAD's Support in the North

13. (C) PAD's General Secretary for northern Thailand, Somchok Chanthon, who doubles as the regional Secretary General of the State Union Enterprise Confederation (an organization known to oppose the current government, and which boasts 200,000 members in 43 state enterprises) told us on September 2 that his focus right now is on sending PAD supporters to Bangkok to participate in the demonstrations. He said a total of 500 PAD supporters from the northern provinces traveled to Bangkok the previous week, with an additional 700-800 having begun their journey since the evening of September 1. An additional 80-100 protestors would travel on September 3 by trains arranged in cooperation with the Railway Workers Union, he added.

¶ 4. (C) Somchok, who works at a power plant in Lampang Province that supplies electricity to much of the north, northeast, and parts of Bangkok, claimed that if the government ever resorted to violence against PAD, the plant, which is the biggest in Thailand and produces 3900 megawatts a day, would do its utmost to cut off power. Such action, he asserted, would occur on a broader scale than current actions by some utility workers targeting government installations in arrears on their bills by three or more months.

¶ 5. (C) Somchok could not say how many of those who had traveled to Bangkok were employees of the plant or EGAT (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand), noting that many did not want to be identified as EGAT employees for fear of retribution by their state-owned enterprise employer. (Comment: Somchok himself is an EGAT employee, and based on our conversation with him, we suspect that a significant number of PAD supporters who have gone to Bangkok also work for EGAT.)

¶ 6. (C) For their part, some university students and faculty have begun networking to pressure the Government to refrain from using violence. On September 2, a group of Fine Arts students at Chiang Mai University that tried to hang up banners decrying the Government's use of force was eventually disbursed by campus security personnel. (Comment: The Dean of the Fine Arts Faculty, who also serves as the President of the "Midnight University" informal political grouping, is ardently opposed to PAD, making it all the more surprising that his students would come out against the Government's actions. Last week, Midnight University released a statement criticizing PAD for using force in its seizure of the NBT television station. Members later told us privately that the PAD was "destroying the media.") Meanwhile, the Rural Physicians Club, which is widely respected in the medical field, released a statement on August 29 criticizing the Government for adopting violent measures to deal with the crisis, and calling on it to resign. (Note: There had not been any violence reported at the time this statement was released.)

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Who's on the Other Side?

¶ 7. (C) In stark contrast to those workers and academics supporting PAD, a contact at the State Enterprise Employees Union (a generally pro-government labor body) told us on September 2 that union members in the northern provinces would not join a strike. Heads of state enterprises in the north had issued guidelines to their staffs informing them that the performance evaluation and pay-increase eligibility of anyone who joined a strike would be negatively impacted, he said. Characterizing those unions that are threatening a strike as "hard-headed" (such as the State Union Enterprise Confederation noted in para 4 above), he emphasized that any politically motivated strike in support of PAD would be frowned upon by his union as unrelated to labor issues.

¶ 8. (C) Under pressure from the Ministry of Interior to send supporters of the pro-government Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD) to Bangkok to participate in counter-demonstrations, or to organize rallies in their provinces in support of the Government, the Chiang Mai Provincial Governor organized a walk from Chiang Mai's railway station to the city moat on September 1. Approximately 2,000 participants joined, including high-ranking military officials and students. Contacts told us that some members of parliament from the governing People's Power Party (PPP) were dissatisfied with the level of participation, expecting a greater turn-out in a province as big as Chiang Mai.

What About the Pundits and Politicians?

¶9. (C) Deputy House Speaker and PPP Chiang Rai MP Samart Kaewmechai was critical of PM Samak, noting to us that he had "failed" to handle the crisis. In the same breath, he lauded General Anuphong's "political maturity," citing Anuphong's measured statements at the September 2 press conference (Ref A).

Samart said that Anuphong's unwillingness to use the military at this time shows a maturing of Thai politics, and sends a clear signal that the armed forces do not politically support either side. He assessed that the evidence of the involvement of some PPP MPs in instigating the clash between DAAD and PAD demonstrators at the Makkhawan Bridge in the wee hours of September 2 was "credible," opining that DAAD sparked the encounter to give PM Samak justification for issuing the September 2 emergency decree.

¶10. (C) Chiang Mai University political science professor Tanet Charoenmuang focused his comments to us on the way forward, speculating that negotiations between General Anuphong and the PAD would be necessary to resolve the crisis. These talks, he said, would hinge on two factors: how much unity there is among the five core PAD leaders; and how much flexibility Anuphong would be given to negotiate. The crisis might not be nearing a resolution, he intimated, observing that even PM Samak's resignation might not be enough to satisfy PAD at this point.

And the Press?

¶11. (SBU) Northern media reactions have been mixed, with the regional Thai News daily running editorials on September 2 characterizing the Samak Government as "incapable" and not solving the country's problems. Other pieces in the same publication focused on the problems a strike would cause, particularly in the transportation sector. A third column called for the Government to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections, arguing that this move would both preserve a democratic system and keep Thailand's economy from worsening. The author then asked rhetorically if PAD would accept a solution that brought back the same faces to the cabinet, and intimated that Thailand would be "doomed" if this were the outcome.

¶12. (SBU) For its part, the Northern Citizen weekly magazine focused on the role of the media, criticizing PAD for attacking the NBT television station in Bangkok on August 26 (Ref C). Conversely, a high-ranking staff member at the magazine reported that some journalists blamed NBT, at least in part, for PAD's demonstrations, noting that the station needed to examine its "role and actions" leading up to the attack. The magazine's editors also said that NBT needed to act as a public source of information, rather than the Government's "political tool." The

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Chiang Mai News daily gave extensive coverage on September 2 to DAAD's counter-demonstrations, with editorials characterizing PAD's protests as a "nuisance and disturbance" and calling on its readers to support DAAD.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
ANDERSON